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Encyclical Letter

THE GOSPEL OF LIFE

Evangelium Vitae

JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS
PRIESTS AND DEACONS
MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS
LAY FAITHFUL
AND ALL PEOPLE OF GOOD WILL
ON THE VALUE AND INVIOLABILITY
OF HUMAN LIFE

"Your eyes beheld my unformed substance" (*Ps* 139:16): the *unspeakable crime of abortion*

58. Among all the crimes which can be committed against life, procured abortion has characteristics making it particularly serious and deplorable. The Second Vatican Council defines abortion, together with infanticide, as an "unspeakable crime."[54]

But today, in many people's consciences, the perception of its gravity has become progressively obscured. The acceptance of abortion in the popular mind, in behavior and even in law itself, is a telling sign of an extremely dangerous crisis of the moral sense, which is becoming more and more incapable of distinguishing between good and evil, even when the fundamental right to life is at stake. Given such a grave situation, we need now more than ever to have the courage to look the truth in the eye and to *call things by their proper name*, without yielding to convenient compromises or to the temptation of self-deception. In this regard the reproach of the Prophet is extremely straightforward: "Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness" (*Is* 5:20). Especially in the case of abortion there is a widespread use of ambiguous terminology, such as "interruption of pregnancy," which tends to hide abortion's true nature and to attenuate its

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[54] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 51: "Abortus necnon infanticidium nefanda sunt cimina."

seriousness in public opinion. Perhaps this linguistic phenomenon is itself a symptom of an uneasiness of conscience. But no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is *the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth.*

The moral gravity of procured abortion is apparent in all its truth if we recognize that we are dealing with murder and, in particular, when we consider the specific elements involved. The one eliminated is a human being at the very beginning of life. No one more absolutely *innocent* could be imagined. In no way could this human being ever be considered an aggressor, much less an unjust aggressor! He or she is *weak*, defenseless, even to the point of lacking that minimal form of defense consisting in the poignant power of a newborn baby's cries and tears. The unborn child is *totally entrusted* to the protection and care of the woman carrying him or her in the womb. And yet sometimes it is precisely the mother herself who makes the decision and asks for the child to be eliminated, and who then goes about having it done.

It is true that the decision to have an abortion is often tragic and painful for the mother, insofar as the decision to rid herself of the fruit of conception is not made for purely selfish reasons or out of convenience, but out of a desire to protect certain important values such as her own health or a decent standard of living for the other members of the family. Sometimes it is feared that the child to be born would live in such conditions

that it would be better if the birth did not take place. Nevertheless, these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, *can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.*

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62. The more recent *Papal Magisterium* has vigorously reaffirmed this common doctrine. Pius XI in particular, in his Encyclical *Casti Connubu*, rejected the specious justifications of abortion.[65] Pius XII excluded all direct abortion, i.e., every act tending directly to destroy human life in the womb "whether such destruction is intended as an end or only as a means to an end."[66] John XXIII reaffirmed that human life is sacred because "from its very beginning it directly involves God's creative activity."[67] The Second Vatican Council, as mentioned earlier, sternly condemned abortion: "From the moment of its conception life must be guarded with the greatest care, while abortion and infanticide are unspeakable crimes."[68]

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[65] Cf. Encylical Letter *Casti Connubii* (December 31, 1930), II: *AAS* 22 (1930), 562-592.

[66] Address to the Biomedical Association "San Luca" (November 12, 1944): *Discorsi a Radionessaggi*, VI (1944-1945), 191; cf. Address to the Italian Catholic Union of Midwives (October 29, 1951), no. 2: *AAS* 43 (1951), 838.

[67] Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra* (May 15, 1961), 3: *AAS* 53 (1961), 447.

[68] Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 51.

The *Church's canonical discipline*, from the earliest centuries, has inflicted penal sanctions on those guilty of abortion. This practice, with more or less severe penalties, has been confirmed in various periods of history. The 1917 *Code of Canon Law* punished abortion with excommunication.[69] The revised canonical legislation continues this tradition when it decrees that "a person who actually procures an abortion incurs automatic (*latae sententiae*) excommunication."[70] The excommunication affects all those who commit this crime with knowledge of the penalty attached, and thus includes those accomplices without whose help the crime would not have been committed.[71] By this reiterated sanction, the Church makes clear that abortion is a most serious and dangerous crime, thereby encouraging those who commit it to seek without delay the path of conversion. In the Church the purpose of the penalty of excommunication is to make an individual fully aware of the gravity of a certain sin and then to foster genuine conversion and repentance.

Given such unanimity in the doctrinal and disciplinary tradition of the Church, Paul VI was able to declare that this tradition is unchanged and

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[69] Canon 2350, § 1.

[70] *Code of Canon Law*, canon 1398; cf. *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, canon 1450, § 2.

[71] Cf. *ibid.*, canon 1329; also *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, canon 1417.

unchangeable.[72] Therefore, by the authority which Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors, in communion with the bishops--who on various occasions have condemned abortion and who in the aforementioned consultation, albeit dispersed throughout the world, have shown unanimous agreement concerning this doctrine *declare that direct abortion, that is, abortion willed as an end or as a means, always constitutes a grave moral disorder,* since it is the deliberate killing of an innocent human being. This doctrine is based upon the natural law and upon the written Word of God, is transmitted by the Church's Tradition and taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium.[73]

No circumstance, no purpose, no law whatsoever can ever make licit an act which is intrinsically illicit, since it is contrary to the Law of God which is written in every human heart, knowable by reason itself, and proclaimed by the Church.

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73. Abortion and euthanasia are thus crimes which no human law can claim to legitimize. There is no obligation in conscience to obey such laws; instead there is a *grave and clear obligation to oppose them by conscientious objection.* From the very beginnings of the

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[72] Cf. Address to the National Congress of Italian jurists (December 9, 1972): *AAS* 64 (1972), 777; Encyclical Letter *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968), 14: *AAS* 60 (1968), 490.

[73] Cf. SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium,* 25.

Church, the apostolic preaching reminded Christians of their duty to obey legitimately constituted public authorities (cf. *Rom* 13:7; 1 *Pet* 2:13-14), but at the same time it firmly warned that "we must obey God rather than men" (*Acts* 5:29). In the Old Testament, precisely in regard to threats against life, we find a significant example of resistance to the unjust command of those in authority. After Pharaoh ordered the killing of all newborn males, the Hebrew midwives refused, "They did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live" (*Ex* 1:17). But the ultimate reason for their action should be noted: "*the midwives feared God*" (*ibid.*) It is precisely from obedience to God-to whom alone is due that fear which is acknowledgment of his absolute sovereignty--that the strength and the courage to resist unjust human laws are born. It is the strength and the courage of those prepared even to be imprisoned or put to the sword, in the certainty that this is what makes for "the endurance and faith of the saints" (*Rev* 13:10).

In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to "take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it."[98]

A particular problem of conscience can arise in cases where a legislative vote would be decisive for the passage of a more restrictive law, aimed at limiting the

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[98] CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (November 18, 1984), no. 22: *AAS* 66 (1974), 744.

number of authorized abortions, in place of a more permissive law already passed or ready to be voted on. Such cases are not infrequent. It is a fact that while in some parts of the world there continue to be campaigns to introduce laws favoring abortion, often supported by powerful international organizations, in other nations--particularly those which have already experienced the bitter fruits of such permissive legislation--there are growing signs of a rethinking in this matter. In a case like the one just mentioned, when it is not possible to overturn or completely abrogate a pro-abortion law, an elected official, whose absolute personal opposition to procured abortion was well known, could licitly support proposals aimed at *limiting the harm* done by such a law and at lessening its negative consequences at the level of general opinion and public morality. This does not in fact represent an illicit cooperation with an unjust law, but rather a legitimate and proper attempt to limit its evil aspects.

Steve Kloehn, *Cardinal takes Lead in Abortion* Protest, CHICAGO TRIBUNE, June 27, 1999

Nearly 1000, people clustered around Cardinal Francis George outside a Humboldt Park abortion clinic Saturday morning, praying the rosary on the hot macadam of Fullerton Avenue.

The peaceful event, which began with mass at nearby St. Sylvester Church and included an eight-block procession from the church to the clinic and back, was a sign of renewed visibility by Catholic abortion opponents.

George's appearance marked the first for a Chicago archbishop at an event outside an abortion clinic, though the cardinals of Los Angeles and New York have participated in similar events. George said Saturday that he would consider future invitations to lead such vigils.

With no speeches, signs, or slogans, the 45-minute vigil outside the Centro Medico Panamericano clinic also suggested a strategy that might reinvigorate abortion opponents after a spate of shootings, clinic bombings and court decisions over the last four years gave the movement a black eye.

"As these events become clearly prayerful, the potential for violence decreases," George said Saturday. "If it's

entirely prayerful, I think it's appropriate for the bishop to be present."

Longtime activists who came from around the state to take part in the vigil embraced that idea.

"It's against the natural human instinct to think that walking in silence and prayer, while people are yelling at you, can work. From the outside, it seems like the people who yell loudest win," said Suzanne Abdalla, 26, of Rockford. "But I think something went on inside that is far greater than that today."

About 50 counterprotesters did show up, carrying signs and chanting slogans, but they were outnumbered by Chicago police on foot and horseback. Police shut down Fullerton Avenue for the procession and vigil, and set up a cordon between the two groups. No arrests were reported.

The tenor of the event did not sway abortion-rights proponents.

"Simply standing here and praying has a depressing effect on any woman who is going in for a pap smear, for birth control, for any reason," said Carol Hayse of Chicago, who protested with the Emergency Clinic Defense Coalition. "And these kinds of events set the stage for all the abortion clinic bombings and shootings."

Nobody went into or out of the Northwest Side clinic in the hours surrounding the vigil.

On both sides of the street, residents living above the shops and offices hung out of windows watching the event, while a small crowd of bystanders gathered on the sidewalk.

"I'm definitely pro-choice, but the pro-choice people don't seem very well organized," said David Albin, who walked over from his nearby Logan Square neighborhood to get a look. "It seems pretty peaceful. And the police turnout is amazing."

The four-hour event began with a mass that filled the steamy nave of St. Sylvester Church and spilled out onto the sidewalk, where more than 200 worshipers listened to the bilingual service on speakers.

In his homily, George implored the crowed to focus its attention on prayer, and to bring "an attitude of welcome and love" to the clinic site.

"If you came with anger in your heart toward anyone who would do or justify an abortion, leave it behind. Leave it in the church.... The Lord doesn't need loud cries or amplification," the cardinal said. "If we pray well, we can transform the entire witness that surrounds this issue."

George also questioned the forces behind abortion, especially economic decisions that he said continue to push modern culture to "replace living people with dead things."

"Most of you here are not very rich. Most of those getting abortions at the clinic are not very rich," he said. "So we must ask: Where are the rich?"

After the mass, when asked whether he wished more mainstream Catholics would take an active role in opposing abortion, George replied, "That is the mainstream of Catholics who you saw here today."

George said he would consider attending future prayer vigils at abortion clinics, but stressed that he would have to be certain that prayer would be the only activity, and be comfortable with the event sponsor's record.

July McCreevy, director of the Chicago chapter of Helpers of God's Precious Infants and an organizer of Saturday's event, called the cardinal's presence "blessed."

"It's just such a calming, serene sound," she said as the crowd repeated the Hail Mary prayer. "It's a lovely day."

Clinic officials did not respond to requests for comment last week, but on Saturday, reporters received a faxed statement bearing the logo of Centro Medico Panamericano clinic and the signature line "MANAGEMENT."

"There are other social issues in this community that must be addressed. To name a few, we would like Cardinal George to assist in keeping our streets safe by eliminating the drug trafficking, single motherhood, violent gang and poverty issues in our community," the statement said.

STATEMENT OF FRANCIS CARDINAL GEORGE, O.M.I.

RE: Prayer Vigil at Centro Medico Abortion Clinic
June 25, 1999

Almost everyone regards abortion as a tragedy, even those who see it as a necessary evil. When tragedies occur, people should pray. A number of people will be praying on Saturday morning.

In Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical on pro-life issues, The Gospel of Life, he notes that the "support and promotion of human life must be accomplished through the service of charity, which finds expression in personal witness, various forms of volunteer work, social activity and political commitment. This is a particularly pressing need at the present time, when the 'culture of death' so forcefully opposes the 'culture of life' and often seems to have the upper hand."

To meet this "pressing need" I will participate in the "Prayer Vigil for Life" at the Centro Medico Pan Americano abortion clinic on Saturday morning. I will not be leading a protest. I will be joining hundreds of others - not to protest - but to promote a "culture of life." We will pray for all who are harmed by abortion: mothers, their unborn children, fathers, families, medical personnel, and society. We will pray for an

increase in respect for the dignity and value of each human life, especially the weakest and most defenseless.

I encourage those who wish to pray in a peaceful way to join me. Please do not bring signs or pickets - bring only your desire to give peaceful witness to our love and deep respect for mothers and their children.

I would also like to say a word to any woman contemplating an abortion at the Centro Medico clinic or any other clinic: the services of the Catholic Church are available to you. We understand that you may feel that abortion is your only choice. But there are alternatives; we will help you choose life. Please call the 24-hour Catholic Charities Maternity Hotline at 1-800-CARE-002.

CHICAGO NOW PRESS RELEASE

Chicago NOW Challenges Cardinal Francis George to Stop Health Center Demonstrations

One way to immediately stop anti-abortion violence and send the message that harassment and terrorism are not acceptable is to stop demonstrating, protesting, and holding prayer vigils outside of health centers that provide reproductive health care and abortion services. Activities that take place outside of clinic doors and harassing and intimidating to the patients seeking health services and to the staff who work in the clinic.

Anti-abortion supporters are once again trying to fool the citizens of Chicago and the American public into believing that their protests are peaceful and non-confrontational. 900 people marching down the street and stopping in front of a clinic to pray is confrontational. Cardinal George and the participants of Saturday's demonstration have a right to their opinions, however, gathering outside of a clinic is inappropriate and an act of aggression.

Anti-abortion supporters know that the majority of American citizens support a woman's right to choose. They know that legislators will not send women back to times of unsafe and illegal back alley abortions. We live in a democracy, anti-abortion supporters would be better to take their message to the steps of Congress.